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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS AND PRM  
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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [CB](#)  
SUBJECT: PRM ADMISSIONS OFFICER VISITS CAMBODIA UNHCR AND  
IOM

REF: PHNOM PENH 1270

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED. NOT FOR INTERNET DISSEMINATION.

11. (SBU) Summary. On November 19, PRM Office of Admissions Program Officer for Southeast Asia Margaret Burkhardt met with the Phnom Penh UNHCR and IOM offices to discuss the impact of the Montagnard action plan six months after its May 1 implementation date. UNHCR reported an increase in Montagnard arrivals to Phnom Penh since the implementation date, and a lack of staff to keep up processing of the recent influx. UNHCR requested expeditious U.S. processing of the last 130 Montagnard individuals who arrived prior to May 1. During visits to Phnom Penh sites for Montagnards, it was apparent that the Montagnards there had daily access to UNHCR staff and implementing NGO partner staff. The UNHCR staff appeared to have good communication with the Montagnards at the sites and seemed responsive to requests. End summary.

#### INCREASE IN ARRIVALS

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12. (SBU) PRM Office of Admissions Program Officer for Southeast Asia Margaret Burkhardt visited Phnom Penh on November 19 to assess the Montagnard action plan six months on. To date, none of the 221 individuals who arrived in Cambodia after the May 1 cutoff date have been processed by UNHCR due to a backlog of previous cases. However, UNHCR Representative Thamrongsak Meechubot told Burkhardt that he believed the new policy may have encouraged a recent uptick in direct arrivals to Phnom Penh. He speculated that Montagnards in the Central Highlands fear that the window to access resettlement opportunities in the U.S. is closing, prompting decisions to seek asylum now. Post described the increase in arrivals in reftel. UNHCR provided updated information to Burkhardt showing there have been 310 new arrivals since January (compared to 277 over the entire year of 2006) and 77 percent of those arrived directly to Phnom Penh.

#### PLANNED DECREASE IN UNHCR STAFF

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13. (SBU) Meechubot stated that the UNHCR Phnom Penh office is bracing for staff turnover of two positions and a staff decrease of one protection officer position starting in December. The staffing change is expected to compound the current backlog in UNHCR processing of Montagnards. Meechubot provided a chart of average processing times for Montagnard cases showing: 8 days from arrival at the UNHCR to the date of registration; 55 days from registration to the

date of first instance decision; and, 98 days from the first decision to the date of an appeal decision. UNHCR processing time has exceeded these averages in recent weeks because of the increase in caseload. In particular, UNHCR has been giving priority to first instance decisions, thereby increasing the amount of time for appeal decisions. According to UNHCR's November 19 report, there are 146 individuals (125 cases) currently pending first instance decisions and 35 individuals (31 cases) pending appeal decisions.

#### REQUEST FOR SPEEDY U.S. PROCESSING FOR PRE-MAY 1 ARRIVALS

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¶4. (SBU) UNHCR Phnom Penh has provided the names of 100 individuals who arrived prior to May 1 and who have been screened out by UNHCR. UNHCR predicted it will provide decisions on the final 30 names of individuals who arrived prior to May 1 during the first week of December. UNHCR requested an expeditious resolution of these last 130 individuals through a decrease in U.S. processing time.

#### VISIT TO PHNOM PENH SITES FOR MONTAGNARDS

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¶5. (SBU) UNHCR Phnom Penh staff escorted Burkhardt to two out of three Phnom Penh sites for Montagnard asylum seekers. At both sites, it was apparent that the Montagnards temporarily residing there had daily access to UNHCR staff and implementing NGO partner staff. The UNHCR staff appeared to have good communication with the Montagnards and seemed responsive to requests. The staff addressed many of the Montagnards by name, and a few of the Montagnard individuals approached the site staff with apparent ease during the

PHNOM PENH 00001426 002 OF 002

visit. There were bulletin boards standing in central areas of both sites with schedules for the most recent resettlement departures, medical exams, and food provision. The Montagnards at the site appeared in good health and reported no complaints during the visit. A UNHCR protection officer told Burkhardt that each site had a box for comments and letters, and that UNHCR staff had personally been handed letters from individuals at the sites at various times in the past.

¶6. (SBU) UNHCR staff at the Phnom Penh sites requested the opportunity to sit in on the International Organization for Migration (IOM) cultural orientations presented to Montagnards accepted for resettlement in the U.S. Burkhardt met with IOM Chief of Mission Iuliana Stefan and passed on this request. Stefan was receptive to the idea and suggested IOM may do a separate cultural orientation just for UNHCR staff at the sites.

#### COMMENT

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¶7. (SBU) It is unfortunate that the recent increase in direct arrivals to UNHCR in Phnom Penh will coincide with the imminent decrease in staff at the UNHCR Phnom Penh office. UNHCR Representative Thamrongsak Meechubot stated that more than half of the 2007 arrivals who have received refugee status determinations (RSDs) have been rejected for refugee status. If this trend continues, and if processing times lengthen, many Montagnards will be lingering in the Phnom Penh sites for ever-increasing periods only to eventually be repatriated back to Vietnam. The good rapport between UNHCR staff and Montagnards at the Phnom Penh sites was reassuring and there was good information flow about the UNHCR refugee status determination and repatriation processes.

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